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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Surviving (thriving) in academia: Feminist support networks and women ECRs

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#### Abstract

In this paper, we reflect upon our experiences and those of our peers as doctoral students and early career researchers in an Australian Political Science department. We seek to explain and understand the diverse ways that participating in an unofficial Feminist Reading Group in our department affected our experiences. We contend that informal peer support networks like reading groups do more than is conventionally assumed, and may provide important avenues for sustaining feminist research in times of austerity, as well as supporting and enabling women and emerging feminist scholars in academia. Participating in the group created a community of belonging and resistance, providing women with personal validation, information and material support, as well as intellectual and political resources to understand and resist our position within the often hostile spaces of the University. While these experiences are specific to our context, time and location, they signal that peer networks may offer critical political resources for responding to the ways that women's bodies and concerns are marginalised in increasingly competitive and corporatised university environments.

**Keywords:** Reading Groups, early career researchers, feminist peer support, peer mentoring, women postgraduates, higher education

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## **Introduction**

In contemporary neoliberal universities, peer support networks represent a crucial strategy for those attempting to survive and thrive in academia. With formal sites of feminist scholarship under significant pressure and facing declining institutional means and support, informal networks are becoming increasingly important. The impact of the global economic crisis and resulting austerity programs on the performance and positioning of higher education institutions has transformed these informal spaces at the edges of our working lives into important resources for sustaining participation in often challenging and unsupportive mainstream disciplinary and institutional environments. In this paper, we contend that peer support networks provide important avenues for sustaining feminist research, as well as enabling emerging female scholars to engage in academia. This paper reflects upon our experiences and those of our peers as doctoral students and early career researchers in an Australian Political Science department. We seek to explain and understand the diverse and often unexpected ways that creating and participating in an unofficial Feminist Reading Group (hereafter FRG) in our department invaluable affected our experiences as PhD students and early career academics.

This article has its origins in informal discussions among a number of members of FRG about the effect of this participation on our experiences of the University. While as authors we are responsible for the content of this paper, we acknowledge our personal and intellectual debts to these discussions. Women who participated in the reading group – and those who reflected on this experience for our project—are actively intellectually engaged in theorising their own experiences. We have attempted to situate these accounts at the centre of our analysis, and participants' roles extend beyond providing data by contributing 'intellectual grounding' for our work (Reyes Cruz 2008, p. 652).

In conducting this critical reflection, we sought written comments from former and current participants on their experiences in FRG. We invited open-ended comments, but also prompted participants to consider whether the group had operated as a form of peer support, whether and how participation in the group had affected their experience of the University, and if they had experienced benefits or disadvantages because of involvement (of any kind) with the group. We invited all of the nearly 40 women who had been included in email invitations to participate in the women-only, student based group throughout its existence to contribute. All had at some point been Research Higher Degree (RHD) students or early career academics with the same department, although approximately half of those invited to participate were no longer based at the University when this study was undertaken; some had taken up academic positions elsewhere, while others had left the sector entirely. Over half of those invited to participate responded to our invitation; many chose to write to us directly, while others submitted their contributions anonymously via an internet based survey site.

Through analysis of the responses, we identified a number of central and recurring themes in the accounts provided which we connected to academic literature on feminist networks, early career researchers, and contemporary universities. Drafts of this paper were circulated for comment to all past and present FRG participants, and their subsequent observations also informed and refined our analysis. What follows is our interpretation of our own experiences and those shared with us by our peers, as well as a reflection on the broader significance of the processes we describe.

Specifically, then, this paper argues that the informal peer support network provided by FRG operated in three important ways. Firstly, the group naturally performed functions traditionally associated with reading groups, creating an informal space concerned with

furthering disciplinary knowledge and developing academic skills. Secondly, in doing so, FRG created a community of belonging for many women who participated, providing them with personal support as well as knowledge and cultural and social capital. Participants shared resources as well as information about institutional processes and, in so doing, gained confidence and support navigating the complex and often hostile spaces of the University. Thirdly, this community of belonging also operated politically as site of resistance to these often hostile spaces. Participating in FRG emphasised the collective nature of our many individual experiences at University, and therefore provided intellectual and political tools with which to understand and contest our shared location within the University. While these experiences are specific to our context and location, we suggest that they signal how peer networks offer critical political resources for resisting and responding to the varied ways that women's bodies and feminist concerns are marginalised in universities engaged in creating and disciplining compliant workforces in an increasingly competitive, corporatised environment.

### **Context: Challenging institutional and disciplinary spaces**

A recent investigation of the status of the women in Australian political science reveals a range of challenges facing women in the discipline. The *Women's Advancement in Australian Political Science* report (Cowden et al., 2012) commissioned by the Australian Political Studies Association (APSA) found that women continue to be underrepresented significantly within Political Studies departments. The APSA report identified a 'leaky pipeline' that sees fewer women progress through the academic hierarchy following the completion of doctoral studies. A dominant conception of 'the normative political scientist' results in women's work being persistently undervalued or marginalised and a 'chilly institutional climate' in many academic

workplaces makes them hostile and unfriendly to women (Cowden et al., 2012, pp. 18-24). This is a disciplinary environment where women comprise less than a third of the academic workforce - a proportion that has not changed significantly since the late 1990s - and congregate in positions of lower status and often less security (Cowden et al., 2012, pp. 15-18). This situation is replicated internationally within the discipline; women hold around 28% of academic positions in Canada (CPSA 2010), 30.3% in the UK (PSA cited in Cowden et al., 2012, p. 18), and comprise 29.9% of the membership of the International Political Science Association (Matonyte et al., 2011).

Such marginalisation occurs for a range of well documented reasons. It is widely acknowledged that varied structural barriers inhibit women's full participation in academic life and work. These include 'unofficial flows of information, the invisibility of women to their male colleagues, disrespect of women's scientific merit, the segregation of women's and men's jobs and the difficult position of young female researchers' (Kantola 2008, p. 203). Dever et al., (2008) identify significant differences in the treatment of male and female Ph.D. students in Australian universities, which have important effects on post-doctoral employment. Women continue to receive less assistance in securing academic employment than their male colleagues, and 'significantly less encouragement than males in those areas relevant to building academic careers: publishing their own work; preparing funding proposals; giving conference papers; and developing professional relationships' (Dever et al., 2008, p. ii). Gherardi (1996, p. 192) has noted that women are sometimes treated as 'guests' in the workplace, arguing that this can provide certain advantages but does not allow for 'ownership' of the of the work environment.

These barriers are exacerbated, of course, by the increasingly neoliberal culture of modern universities which tend to prioritise 'profit, control, and efficiency, all hallmark values of

the neoliberal corporate ethic' (Giroux 2002, p. 434). According to Feigenbaum and Iqani (2013, p.19), austerity policies have emphasised this increasingly neoliberal culture in the higher education sector, creating a 'climate in which income, profit and revenue are prioritised, and [...] competition and increased corporatisation are becoming the norm.' Dever et al., (2008, p. 16) note that a sectorwide 'shift away from a model of academic work based around notions of "collegiality" to one governed by increasingly [sic] levels of managerialism has not lessened... dependence on male cultural norms.' At the institution in question in this paper, the last decade has seen a rationalisation of undergraduate electives and other offerings with an emphasis on gender, and the Gender Studies program in the Bachelor of Arts recently abolished altogether (National Tertiary Education Union 2013). An emphasis on quantifiable outcomes through performance appraisal systems is also part of this larger reorientation of universities (Thomas 1996, p. 149). As universities generally embrace neoliberal models focused on achieving performance benchmarks, such as academic outputs in the 'right' journals, performance management strategies are increasingly extended to Research Higher Degree students in order to increase the efficiency of resources allocated to research supervision and encourage students to operate like ever more productive employees (see for example, performance management measures adopted for RHD supervision at the University of Queensland 2011). The above trends combine to place constraints on the kind of research that is performed and valued within universities and to generate increasingly competitive cultures within departments.

These structural and institutional pressures shaped the environment in which the authors and other participants in FRG began their doctoral studies. Offered widely varying levels of support from mentors and supervisors, many of us perceived our School's official spaces to be *particularly* gendered and not necessarily reflective of our research interests or intellectual

backgrounds. In this context, a number of female doctoral students with varying levels of expertise and interest in feminism formed an informal reading group in order to provide an alternative space for debate and the sharing of ideas related to their academic, intellectual and political interests. The group operated on a continuing albeit irregular basis from 2007 and generally maintained around 10 to 20 active participants at any one time. FRG operated self-consciously within feminist parameters that changed over time; while the group consistently had women only participation and attempted to operate inclusively and non-hierarchically, other parameters – such as group processes, the frequency of meetings, and the focus or theme of readings - were regularly reformulated. Several years on, former participants based at the University continue to meet socially, but FRG has not gathered in its former guise to discuss a reading for some time. Cultural changes in the School environment appear to have made the initial impetus for the group's formation less relevant and most original participants have now moved on.

Although reading published research was the ostensible purpose of the FRG, the group also became an important peer support network with a range of less formal functions. As we will outline below, it had a significant effect on participants' experience of the university. While women's levels of involvement in FRG activities varied widely, participants overwhelmingly found this involvement to be important to their experience of the University. One participant commented that 'I sometimes wonder how I would have progressed in the PhD without the support of reading group'; another that the group 'was an invaluable, irreplaceable, and intrinsic part of my postgrad experience'. A number of participants noted that FRG was important in enabling them to continue their studies in times of difficulty: 'I doubt I would have been able to continue in the PhD program without their support - both practical and emotional' one



participant reflected. Finally, another notes that ‘I was often aware of the statistics about the attrition rates from PhDs - while I can’t know if I would have ‘made it’ without the reading group, I am certain it would have taken longer and been a much more difficult journey.’ Participants overwhelmingly reflect that FRG provided them with unexpected but indispensable support during their studies.

### **Academic and disciplinary functions**

Reading groups are conventionally understood to perform a range of important disciplinary and academic purposes. The PhD is often a process of becoming deeply embedded in a small field of literature, while reading groups provide an opportunity to broaden exposure to other fields and improve critical thinking skills. Doctoral students generally have the opportunity to participate in formal seminars which are often tasked with exactly this function. However, these can be fraught and difficult. As Kaserman and Wilson (2009, p. 28) argue, because official spaces such as seminars often become ‘a space for the embodiment of individualised claims to knowledge,’ a performance of academic authority through ‘disconnected monologues’ rather than genuine engagements can occur. Kahn (1981, p. 122-4) also notes problems of being ‘socrateased,’ arguing that ‘defending or explaining a position is lonely and stressful’ and that fear and anger do not enhance mental acuity. Seminars can be particularly difficult for women, as Toril Moi (2003, p. 4) compellingly notes:

Every year some female graduate students tell me that they feel overlooked, marginalized, silenced in some seminars. They paint a picture of classrooms where the alpha males — so-called ‘theory boys’ — are encouraged to hold forth in impossibly obscure language, but where their own interventions elicit no response. These women, in

short, say that they are not listened to, that they are not taken seriously, and that they get the impression that their perceptions of the matter at hand are of no interest to anyone else.

Such experiences tend to reproduce a particularly clichéd ideology in which theory and abstract thought are thought to belong to men and masculinity, and women are imagined to be the bearers of emotional, personal, practical concerns. In a system that grants far more symbolic capital, far more intellectual power, to abstract theorizing than to, say, concrete investigations of particular cases, these women lose out in the battle for symbolic capital. This is bad for their relationship to the field they love, and it is bad for their careers in and out of graduate school.

The institutional dynamics that see many mainstream higher education spaces requiring and rewarding particularly gendered performances of intellectual authority may also be pedagogically counterproductive; Moi (2003) argues that being willing to admit ignorance or uncertainty is central to learning.

Kaserman and Wilson (2009, p. 29) contend that, unlike formal seminars, ‘reading groups allow a comfort around admitting little or no knowledge of certain terminologies or concepts’. Our experience confirms this view of reading groups, and the important role that they can play in building disciplinary knowledge and skills in informal environments. Participants valued the opportunity to engage academically in a context where the performance of intellectual authority was not required. One woman noted she welcomed the opportunity to get feedback on ideas ‘without worrying about not performing academia “properly”, aka “appearing weak”.’ Another commented that ‘there can be lots of more senior middle-aged male voices around, and the

reading group was a nice counterbalance to that...it was only ECRs/postgrads, providing a freedom to speak that might not have felt the same were there more senior figures present.'

Participants in FRG also reported appreciating the opportunity to develop particular kinds of disciplinary knowledge, and exposure to new ideas was one benefit of participating that was frequently highlighted by respondents in the feedback provided. As such, the group was 'a forum for critical engagement with academic debates and ideas.' One participant commented that 'Although my research is not directly linked to feminist studies, the reading group has been a great opportunity to share and discuss general and current topics in politics and IR [International Relations]... interaction in the group offered me insights into feminist, critical and indigenous studies in Australian political science.' Those working with gender and feminist concerns specifically found FRG particularly valuable in providing a theoretical and disciplinary grounding that enabled them to articulate and connect their concerns to others, and to situate their own work within a disciplinary context (albeit one with which we were not formally institutionally aligned):

I found it refreshing to read and discuss work that was not directly related to mine, but was connected somehow through broader feminist ideas and theories. These discussions were crucial in grounding my research and situating it in the broader field of women's studies.

Participants also described FRG as a useful space to further their own research. One woman noted: 'I also found this group a useful space to test ideas and connect the different pieces of research we were all working on.' In this way, FRG performed another function typical of such groups in fostering the development of critical and analytical skills essential to our roles as researchers. As one participant commented:

reading group (the reading bit, shock of all shocks) has helped me build the skills essential for a PhD (I assume that students are supposed to come ready equipped with these, or muddle along in confusion). Critical engagement, etc etc. I'm also getting better at asking questions when I don't know what the hell is going on. I've enjoyed the opportunity to read non-thesis related academic publications. I think it's probably quite easy to become insular, and readings looked at in the group (when not suggested by me) have allowed me to explore ideas and fields outside of my own. It's hard to deny that it can be a drain on time spent on the thesis. But without the support of reading group, I wouldn't know how to write a thesis.

In this space, some found peers who would provide 'critical constructive feedback on my own writing, help me expand my horizons through their writing, and assist in figuring out complex theories together.' FRG was thus able to provide an informal supplementary learning space that encouraged the confidence of participants to grow alongside their intellectual horizons.

The disciplinary functions conventionally performed by reading groups supplement institutionally provided academic training in important ways. Women who participated in FRG reported learning essential academic skills, from 'experience with writing and publishing' to developing 'presentation and analytical skills, without fear of seeming to be an inadequate researcher.' For many, FRG was a critical form of scholarly development precisely because as 'the point of this group was not to show-off with our theoretical knowledge' it was possible to take risks with theory and ideas. As one woman reflects:

The most important thing for me about this group was the fact that it created a space where it was okay to say 'I don't know'. In other research environments I have found there is a tendency to 'show no weakness' and if you're not completely expert in an area

there is a reluctance to share ideas. In this group, it was okay to share an unrefined idea, to ask for help from others, and to admit that we did not have all the answers, without being judged. This is such a valuable commodity, and allows for an honesty in academic work that is perhaps lacking elsewhere.

This meant that participants were often inclined to open rather than close intellectual questions or debates, allowing space for what Walker (2011, p. 266) designates ‘an unfinished reading, an inconclusive reading, a reading that prevaricates, a wondrous reading that manages – despite these returns – to remain open and engaged (present) with what it reads, ready for the possibility of surprise and even revelation’. This provides an important counterpoint or corrective to the organisational culture of contemporary universities in which, as one respondent in Robyn Thomas’ (1996, p. 149) study of women’s experience of academic performance appraisal noted, ‘everything has be oriented towards a particular outcome – you’re always doing things for a particular purpose – not going to have a look to see what might be there.’

### **Communities of belonging**

In addition to these traditional reading group functions, FRG came to represent a community rather than an occasional academic practice, extending into a broader feminist network with which members could create spaces of belonging in the university environment. Academic work - and doctoral studies in particular - can be isolating. ECRs frequently report feeling unsettled, anxious and often experience self-doubt (Driscoll et al., 2009, p. 12). Barata et al., (2005, p. 239) argue that ‘In graduate school, women have reported lower levels of academic self-concept, more negative self-concepts, and less career commitment than men.’ Likewise, Grant and Knowles (2000, p. 9) note that women academics often suffer ‘anxiety about being discovered as

frauds'. FRG participants similarly reported experiencing loneliness, as well as doubts about their abilities and whether they belonged at University. The importance of the group in overcoming isolation was frequently commented upon by participants:

It's a really warm group - quite inclusive - I was new in the department and some of the girls would stop by my office to check if I was coming along to reading group - at reading group we didn't just talk about the paper - we would talk about other things going on at uni too - even when I didn't have much to say, it was nice to hear that others had similar experiences to me - when I did express concerns, it was nice to feel understood.

Participants highlight the importance of emotional support and a safe opportunity to discuss doubts and concerns. One woman stated, 'I think doing a PhD is an isolating experience, and I'm so grateful for the support. I think there are probably few times that you meet a group of women who are so supportive and accept you and your crazy shit, unquestioningly.'

Peer support encouraged a sense of connection: 'The group made me feel as though I was part of something and not going it alone. It made me feel as though I had something to contribute.' This feeling of connection often helped keep doubts and anxieties in perspective, and the awareness that 'others had faced similar problems' helped build academic confidence; 'discussion of the different research projects often helps to get a more objective view on your own research and to see that others have had similar difficulties and how they dealt with stressful times helps to be more confident'. This extended to the way participants were able to plan and understand their own research candidacy, as interacting with 'different members at different stages also provided a touchstone for anticipating and understanding what lay ahead.' One participant reported feeling occasionally constrained by the sharing of doubts, worrying that repeated expressions of doubt and reassurance reflected 'a culture of self-deprecation in the

group - that you couldn't say that you felt you had done well at something... I think it has improved a bit with more people finishing their PhDs.' Others found the group provided research motivation:

I felt as if I'm part of a supportive network and that there are people who are going through the same struggles as I am - and this, for me, was and still is a significant factor that strengthens me to continue with my research. The friendships I formed and the support structures that automatically came with it... the connections that supported me in each of these processes were initially made at the feminist reading group.

These connections and the confidence they built helped make many feel 'more welcome at the university and a part of the academic surroundings'.

Belonging was also reinforced through the sharing of information about academic and institutional processes; they became a crucial opportunity to generate and transmit cultural and social capital (see Bourdieu 1986). From the seventeenth century 'invisible college' or 'old-boy networks' have been identified as a boon to those on the inside of the University (O'Leary and Mitchell 1990, p. 58) and a barrier to those not 'in the know'. Recent studies of the position of women in political science outlined above have found some invisible barriers remain in place (Cowden et al., 2012, pp. 22-24). FRG provided a forum for sharing knowledge about often opaque University processes and practices, as well as teaching and research strategies:

The information and support provided to PhDs by the School and University is wholly inadequate. I can only assume that the University has faith that we will tell each other how to 'do' a PhD. Whilst a focus should be on the importance of supervisory

relationship etc., the practicalities of the PhD process are left oddly mysterious. I wonder if this is part of the University's hazing<sup>1</sup> practice for new students.

FRG was a crucial resource for redressing this opacity, operating as an information sharing network for participants learning about 'how things work' at the University and in the department. Information about formal policies and processes circulated through the group, along with less formal advice about expectations, cultures, and accessing resources:

The individuals within the group all managed to help me navigate school policy, made me aware of school expectations and rules, helped me find accommodation and desk space, understand how norms and practices operated within the school, shared knowledge about the PhD program requirements, read and commented on my work, gave me advice on my supervisor relationship and essentially kept me involved in the program and the school.

Group members also shared information provided by supervisors and mentors with each other. Particularly useful advice or strategies suggested by established academics circulated among a broader group of students than those under their direct supervision. This sometimes included strategic career advice; 'the feminist reading group provided information based on experience on everything from thinking about journal publications (and where and how to pursue that) to places to look for work, and examples of job applications during my own efforts to write these documents.' Advice about 'how to navigate academia' was particularly valued, and women reported participating in FRG facilitated their research endeavours:

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<sup>1</sup> Hazing is a term used to describe a process whereby a newcomer to a group is subject to initiation practices that may be difficult, stressful, dangerous or humiliating in order to gain group admittance or acceptance (for more information see: Honeycutt 2005; Gadon and Josefowitz 1989 ).



I felt that achieving milestones like completing the first draft, submitting journal articles, presenting at conferences, and responding to reviewers and markers was all made more manageable and possible because of the advice of those who had gone before, and those who were in the midst of these milestones.

For many, participating in FRG became a process of peer mentoring that was a crucial resource in an occasionally unfriendly or intimidating environment. O'Leary and Mitchell (1990, p. 58) note that women academics 'have been found repeatedly to be less well integrated into their academic departments and disciplines than men,' and lack of access to networks and mentoring has been identified as a significant part of this problem. Dever et al., (2008, p. iii) note that women PhD graduates report receiving significantly less mentoring from supervisors, and less involvement in professional and social networking than their male peers, and that these factors have a crucial effect on post-PhD earning and employment outcomes. White (2013, p. 118) argues mentoring is both a right and a crucial career strategy for women early career academics:

an essential part of being strategic is to expect that your university and your academic department will provide mentoring – and ask for it. Women academics are often ambivalent about networking, even though strong research networks are important for career progression and successful promotion. Women's reticence in networking is linked to their belief in notions of academic merit, that if their performance is good enough they will be promoted.

However, while mentoring traditionally provides career advice, contacts and commentary on work (Bennion 2004, p. 111), it is also traditionally hierarchical (Driscoll et al., 2009, p. 5). Darder (2012, p. 415) notes 'authoritarian dynamics' can exist in traditional mentoring relationships. McGuire and Reger (2003, p. 55) argue that '[d]rawing on feminist principles, co-

mentoring redefines emotion as a source of knowledge and a catalyst for understanding, rather than a distraction from one's academic development.' Peer mentoring involves a less hierarchical exchange of support, although as Barata et al., (2005, p. 241) note in their study of their own feminist research group, spaces that are peer based and draw on feminist principles are not themselves free of internal power dynamics. Peers, like mentors, can provide encouragement, leadership and collaboration opportunities; 'Positive outcomes from collegial relationships with peers included increased confidence, increased resilience and job retention, improved negotiation skills for better job conditions, reciprocity towards peers leading to further opportunities being shared with each other, improved writing skills for journal publications' (Airini et al., 2011, p. 52-53).

Our experience in FRG certainly supports these findings. As discussed, participation in the group enabled and extended a range of other academic engagements. Participants provided and received 'constructive criticism and feedback, grounded in a genuine effort by others to support my research and improve the work'. This generated 'important connections to a research network,' which, for more than one participant, acted as 'a catalyst for the development of professional relationships which have provided professional support and opportunities for further networking as well as opportunities for work.' FRG participation also stimulated other academic activities, with members encouraging each other to attend conferences and present papers, forming reading and writing groups in areas of specialty interest, encouraging each other to apply for jobs and other professional opportunities, and collaborating on a number of publications and research projects (including this article). In 2010, encouraged by experiences in collaboration, a collective of women from FRG initiated and organised an interdisciplinary early career researchers' conference, which was supported by the School and the University, and was

attended by participants from across Australia and New Zealand. Supervisors and more experienced feminist academics fostered and encouraged these endeavours. The peer network formed through FRG enabled us to magnify the impact of that essential advice and support, and was central to the confidence some developed in our capacities to usefully engage in academic spaces.

While the community formed in this space was enabling for many of us, it is important to note that it did not transform or transcend broader institutional power relationships and patterns of privilege. As an informal peer based network, FRG reflected and in many ways reinforced existing patterns of social interaction. Efforts to invite newcomers and welcome them to participate often reflected existing social interactions through shared office spaces, teaching commitments, academic interests or supervisory arrangements, and especially social networks. Most (although not all) participants were white, straight, cis-gendered and middle class; the group was in fact generally whiter than our department as a whole. Participants' racial and socio-economic standpoints and locations no doubt affected their access to and experience with reading group, as well as the accounts provided in this paper. As Barata et al., (2005, p. 234) note in relation to their own feminist research group, 'it is clear that our differing histories, ethnicities, sexualities and other contextual factors made participation different for each one of us, and some important graduate school experiences are absent in our dialogue and analysis'.

Participation in FRG and the community that formed from it tended to reflect other political dispositions. Women engaged with reading group activities and with each other in a wide variety of ways; some had extensive previous engagements with feminist ideas and explicit commitments to feminist politics, while others did not. One participant reflected that '[t]he women only environment was very supportive - a discussion doesn't become supportive only

because it's all women. But I find the feminist reading group and the way it is conducted to be very inclusive and encouraging participation'. A different respondent was more critical, finding the group's focus occasionally exclusive:

While I fully understand and support the reasons why the group began as a women's only space, I feel that as an academic critical reading group it could have developed over the years and found creative ways to engage the voices of men.... While I can see the value of creating a space that supports the voices of women, I think that the exclusion of men is a missed opportunity for developing positive relationships across the gender divide.

One woman whose interaction with the group was limited subsequently reflected that this had much to do with her views on feminism, as 'Feminism is not an ideology to which I subscribe.' For many who chose to participate, the self-consciously and explicitly feminist nature of FRG was essential to this project:

The designation of the group as a 'feminist' reading group, I think, was/is a crucial aspect of the functioning and success of the collective. The nature of the group was frequently discussed (a strength I think) but as I understood it feminist refers both to the 'type' of material we read and discuss in the group, but also refers to the ethos of the group.... the way it served as a point of both an academic engagement and a site of interrogation about institutional power relations through conscious solidarity and support, to me are key feminist practices.

### **Solidarity and resistance**

The community of belonging established through the reading group also operated politically, functioning, as one member observed, as 'a community of solidarity and, at times, resistance'.

Sharing experiences at FRG helped to emphasise their systemic and collective character and this provided intellectual and political resources with which to understand, resist and contest our positioning at University. FRG provided participants with an opportunity to understand individual experiences of exclusion, exploitation, self-doubt, discrimination, etc. as shared and thus fundamentally political in character. Discussing and sharing our experiences at University in a context framed by feminist and other critical intellectual resources meant we were able to identify ways these experiences reflect broader political questions and processes. Understanding the gendered nature of our experiences provided crucial context to individual struggles to have research valued or validated in a mainstream disciplinary context, or with successfully assuming and performing academic authority. It also helped many of us contextualise the precarity and uncertainty that often characterised our financial and professional situations. As casual employees of the university, many experienced to varying extents what Giroux (2002, p. 453) identifies as 'the exploitative conditions under which many graduate students work, constituting a de facto army of service workers who are underpaid, overworked, and shorn of any real power or benefits.' Identifying these experiences as collective rather than purely the result of individual professional decisions or intellectual limitations highlights the crucial function that existing institutional arrangements perform in reinforcing patriarchal social structures and managing academic labour in neoliberal university environments.

For some, these realisations were powerful but not necessarily positive. One member speculated: 'I wonder if it [participating in Feminist Reading Group] made me more jaded, encouraged my already burgeoning feelings of suspicion towards the university, or prepared me.' Another participant noted that:

I think that as I've not engaged much in departmental politics I perhaps have not been negatively affected by the lack of focus on gender and women's issues in the department. This is partly because I don't intend on pursuing an academic career, but I can see how it would be a major hurdle if I did want to go down that path. So to summarise, being part of feminist reading group opened my eyes to what it might be like as a feminist academic in the department and to the difficulties I could face in pursuing my line of research.

These perspectives may reflect what White (2013, p. 120-1) describes as more general tendencies among women academics to move between positions of resistance, frustration, and ambivalence within and towards the University. Reay (2000, p. 17) notes 'there is virtually nothing written about the dilemmas of operating as a feminist in an academic industry underpinned and shored up by very hierarchical structures and individualistic, competitive ways of working.' While this may no longer be the case, as individual postgraduate students it is often difficult to fully understand these structures and it can feel almost impossible to challenge established practices. For many FRG participants, understanding challenges encountered as fundamentally collective was an empowering and important form of identity work, and the group provided vital resources with which to understand, contest and resist this collective experience.

FRG became a site for brainstorming and sharing resistant strategies, as well as more consciously articulated practices of solidarity. The process of sharing information about university processes outlined above also often extended to collaborating in developing strategies for managing the impact of these conditions. This included 'the best way to complete forms, who to speak to about candidature issues,' as well as 'information about some of the personalities... and how other people have managed/worked with them.' Participants in FRG deployed their own resources to support each other; 'individuals within the Group have developed strong networks

within the PhD and research community and utilise their strong relationships with the staff and the school to help guide others.’ This ranged from working together to raise and resolve industrial issues around working conditions, to more informal discussions about dealing with gendered harassment from students or managing the personal and professional impacts of parenthood.

Importantly, participants extended beyond sharing strategies to acting collectively. Women participating in research seminars or new research endeavours were able to rely upon others to provide support for their efforts, particularly ‘in situations or experiences of hostility, dismissal and unnecessary critique... engaged in by other academics to ‘prove a point’ or ‘show off’ or ‘point score’ in public settings’. This conscious practice of solidarity made a difference to the way many participated in the life of the department, enabling us to contribute more effectively to intellectual discussions, and to challenge unhelpful processes, decisions or behaviours. Lee and Boud (2003, p. 189) argue that to ‘work with and against debilitating emotions such as fear requires an explicit engagement with its obverse: with trust and the location of positive desire in individuals’ work lives’; FRG facilitated this trust. As one woman noted, the solidarity practiced by participants operated in some situations as an enabling political base:

the ability to rely on support in uncertain engagements with other RhDs [Research Higher Degree students] or with academics in the department, was important... Taking on a representative role for RhDs during my candidature would not have happened without that previous development of confidence, and particular points I had to push (against significant resistance) during that role were possible because of the solidarity of a network of other ECRs who supported my efforts.

It is a sign of our relative privilege that these perspectives were often welcomed within our department, particularly by senior feminist academics who were frequently both important allies and receptive to questions or challenges. This was not always the case however, and one participant noted that ‘at times being associated with the group made encounters with particular academics or particular admin staff just that bit more difficult.’

In consciously adopting practices of solidarity and support, FRG provided the opportunity to experience and practice alternative ways of performing academia. In an environment where ‘stereotypically masculine traits such as competitiveness are encouraged’ (Barata et al., 2005, p. 240), group members were able to model more supportive intellectual engagement:

Outside of my supervisor, when I first began my research at the University I felt very disconnected to the research environment. Discussions about research were combative, and often not very constructive. Once I became involved in the feminist reading group I realised that not all research environments needed to be based on one-upmanship and intellectual bickering. From this group I received constructive criticism and feedback, grounded in a genuine effort by others to support my research and improve the work.

The opportunity to develop different kinds of academic practice was a valuable and unexpected outcome of participation in FRG. The process of deciding for ourselves what knowledges, processes and practices we found helpful and intellectually engaging was exciting and challenging. One participant reflects that:

Femo reading group [shorthand for FRG] was a brilliant support network both personally and professionally, and it was especially rewarding because we created and managed it ourselves. When there were times that the department culture was so masculinist,



competitive, and antagonistic, the group was a great place to develop confidence and resilience for not just dealing with it, but challenging it, and working to make a better environment for the women who would come after us.

FRG provided those who participated with an opportunity to practice academic work in a context where care for others was actively emphasised. Reay (2000, p. 19) has argued that '[a]cademia, with its ethos of, at best, mutual instrumentalism, at its worst, individualistic, competitive self-interest and self-promotion lacks any intrinsic ethic of care'. Care work is not highly valued but it is often an expected part of women's work. As Eveline and Booth (2004, p. 249) note, 'relational work, however complex and time-consuming, can become dismissed as everyday nicety and ordinary friendliness.' However, this political and intellectual work is not without costs, as one participant noted:

reading group was fun, and in the early years was a really important source of support and critical thinking about engaging with the institution... but it was also a lot of work, demanded a lot of emotional energy... It really came to feel like care work after the first couple of years - invisible and unrecognised in any formal sense, but also deeply necessary and intrinsically rewarding. I think actually that there are interesting parallels with commonly recognised forms of (gendered) care work and neoliberal institutions - the way that economic rationalism relies on this kind of invisible work that is not defined as work in any formal sense

In this way, it may be that spaces like reading group are simultaneously resistant and also required by the contemporary University, performing functions that are both vitally necessary and yet persistently undervalued.

## **Conclusions**

While the nature of the FRG space was often contested and discussed, and processes and practices have changed over time along with the participants, this experience of explicitly feminist peer support had an important impact on our experiences of University. In addition to furthering disciplinary knowledge and developing academic skills, FRG functioned as a crucial peer support network. The community that the group became enabled participants to provide and share personal validation, information and material support navigating the complex and often hostile spaces of the University. Additionally, this community operated to create a critical space at University, providing intellectual and political resources to understand and contest our shared location. The resistant community formed in this space became a crucial personal and academic network for many participants, facilitating and shaping academic engagements.

While these experiences are specific to our context and location, we suggest they signal that peer networks may offer critical political resources for resisting and responding to the ways that women's bodies and feminist concerns are made marginal in universities engaged in creating and disciplining compliant workforces in an increasingly competitive and corporatised environment. Our experiences are undoubtedly limited and partial; we are a very fortunate group of women in many ways. While our backgrounds and experiences are by no means uniform, most participants in the reading group are racially and socio-economically privileged. We worked and studied in a large and relatively well resourced department in a relatively well resourced and established metropolitan Australian university, and were often supported in our endeavours by more senior feminist academics in positions of intellectual and institutional authority. The feminist community we were able to form in this space with these resources became a crucial personal and academic network for many of us, facilitating and shaping

academic engagements, and playing a role that has extended into and expanded many of our ongoing lives and careers.

Ultimately, we believe the flexibility and resilience of informal networks represent important strengths in a challenging political and economic environment. Women's experiences and engagements with FRG, for example, varied according to their needs and circumstances, with the group fulfilling different functions for participants depending on their needs in a changing institutional context. Our experiences have been that the benefits of explicitly feminist peer support were complex, multilayered, and extensive:

I think that the fact the group provided for me everything from a forum for critical engagement with academic debates and ideas to a community of solidarity and, at times, resistance to a social network including women I number amongst my closest friends testifies to the multiple benefits of the group.

Women ECRs continue to face enormous challenges seeking to build academic careers in contemporary universities. Like our male colleagues, we have chosen careers that involve engaging with and operating in a highly competitive and often unfriendly institutional and intellectual environment. With traditional sites and strongholds of feminist scholarship under pressure, many of us also continue to conduct these engagements in professional and disciplinary terrain where our approaches, concerns, and bodies are marginalised. Peer support and practices of feminist solidarity are essential and important resources in this struggle.

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